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OCEANIA

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE STUDY OF THE NATIVE PEOPLES OF AUSTRALIA, NEW GUINEA AND THE ISLANDS OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN

VOLUME IV

1933 - 1934

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ABORIGINAL MEDICAL PRACTICE IN EAST ARNHEM LAND

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AS would naturally be expected among so primitive a people as the aborigines of East Arnhem Land the operation of magic, both in causing and in relieving sickness, is largely believed in. Apart from this, however, there is found the fairly extensive use of certain vegetable products which are at least believed to be of medicinal value.[2] In some cases the treatment consists of a combination of magic and the administration of medicine. Moreover, where medical treatment proves non-effective one may always fall back on evil magic as the explanation of failure.

One of the complaints from which these people frequently suffer is muscular rheumatism, particularly in the lumbar region. In such a case, should there be a *marrngit*, magician, in the neighbourhood, his aid will be sought, and he operates in the following way. Presuming the patient is suffering from backache, the *marrngit* has him lie face downward in the sand, and then proceeds to feel carefully all over his back. He then arises, breaks off a small leafy branch and dances round the patient, swishing vigorously with the branch. Presently he dashes away to a considerable distance as though in pursuit of something, and still swishing his branch. This is done to drive off the evil spirit which is responsible for the man's condition and which the *marrngit* alone is able to see. Having accomplished this purpose he returns to the patient. He now selects one spot on the man's back, which he presses and kneads thoroughly, after which he massages the surrounding area, working all the time toward

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[2] Unfortunately I am not a botanist, nor have I been able to discover any literature which might enable me to identify many of the trees and plants used and which are peculiar to these northern regions.

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the spot selected. After a good deal of massaging, which no doubt affords some relief, he applies his mouth to the spot and sucks vigorously. Next he takes a mouthful of water from a vessel placed in readiness, blows some of the water on to the affected part, and then convincingly ejects from his mouth some foreign substance which has been injected into the man by the *mali* (grosser spirit) of some *morkwoi* (dead person).[3] I have seen such things as small stones, pieces of charcoal, bones of animals, and bits of wood thus extracted. This foreign body is shown to the patient who, nothing doubting, immediately feels relieved and cheerfully pays the " doctor " his fee.

Some years ago our little boy was suffering from a distressingly severe attack of inflamed eyes, and a kindly old *marrngit*, through a fellow-tribesman, requested that he might be allowed to operate on him. Conscious of his kindly thought, and knowing he could do no injury to the little chap, Mrs. Webb and I consented. He thereupon came up to our house, and after carefully massaging the child's head for a while, clapped his huge bearded mouth to his temple, sucked hard for a moment or two, then turned round and ejected a mouthful of blood. The child was at least no worse after the operation. The *marrngit's* explanation of the affliction was that a donkey which constitutes one of our possessions, had come up, hung his head over the fence, and stared at the child playing inside the yard. The little chap had naturally looked at the donkey, whose evil gaze had done the damage.

The " virtue " or healing magic believed to be contained in the water of the ceremonial or totemic *mangotʃi* (pool or well) of the horde is made available by a ceremony known as *wontjurr*. In this district the ceremonial totemic centre is always some pool, well, or spring of water. In the ceremony of *wontjurr* a representation of this *mangotʃi* is made by scooping out a circular hollow in the sand. In this hollow the patient is placed, while all round sit his fellow-tribesmen and friendly associates. A certain chant, differing for each horde, is then sung over and over again to the accompaniment of *bilma* (clack-sticks) and *yiraki* (drone-pipe), and as it is being sung

[3] These two terms are often used as being practically synonymous, and the conception behind them is practically equivalent to the old idea of ghost.

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the patient is washed from head to foot by having water poured over him. This ceremony is believed to be particularly efficacious in cases of injury which have caused bleeding. In such cases not only does it aid the person's recovery, but also removes the tabu attaching to the shed blood. If, in the course of hunting, a man has been so injured, he must not give of his catch to another until by this ceremony he has been cleansed. This same ceremony is also used for the purification of the relatives of a recently deceased person. If a man be near his sacred pool the ceremony is performed there and he is washed in the actual " holy water " itself.

The most elaborate medical treatment of which I have knowledge is that carried out in cases of extreme constipation or for a severe attack of indigestion leading to a distension of the stomach and known as *worba*. First of all a rough platform of sticks is constructed. On this platform is laid a thick covering of leafy branches of *maipin* (ironwood tree) and on these leaves a covering of wet grass from some fresh water pool or swamp.

The sand beneath the platform is then scooped out and a fire made, which must be wholly of *maipin*, the leaves, bark, gum, and wood being used. When the fire is well burning the patient is placed, face downward, on the platform already prepared, a covering of boughs or paper-bark is placed over him, and there he is left for several hours to steam. He is then turned over on his back, and thus spends several more hours. At the end of the day he is bathed with cold water, and will almost certainly feel relieved, but if not, the process may be repeated the following day. In cases where no relief is afforded it is consequently known that the patient's condition is the result of evil magic. It is believed to be produced by some sorcerer getting hold of something belonging to the patient—his loin-cloth or *balara* (pubic shield) being considered particularly effective. After " singing " this article he opens out the coals and ashes of his fire, and in the centre digs a small hole, into which he crams it. He then fills the hole with earth, scrapes back the coals and ashes, and once more " sings " over it his evil chant, at the same time naming the man he wishes to injure. This operation results in a stoppage of the man's bowels, and so produces a condition which nothing can relieve, and which ultimately ends in death.

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136 Though most of the snakes in this district are non-venomous, there are at least two varieties whose bite is deadly. These are the *darrpa* (Port Darwin brown snake) and the *bati kuririniri* (death adder). The former of these is the more common along the coast, and from the bite of this reptile quite a number of deaths occur. Nothing approaching effective treatment for snake-bite has been discovered by these aborigines, and nothing more futile than that 755 followed could well be imagined. A man who has been bitten is made to sit down beside a fire while another man blows smoke through a hollow branch or dry pandanus stem on to him. As the smoke emerges at the other end of the tube another man carefully watches, and if in the smoke he sees the *mali* (non-material form) of a snake, it is known that a *ragalk* (sorcerer) has brought about the misfortune, and the man will die. If no such form is observed the man will recover. Frequently this ceremony is performed after the man has died, and so merely serves to corroborate a conviction which has already been definitely reached. In such a case imagination never fails to create the *mali* of the snake.

755 Another very curious method of procedure is as follows: If a 752 person has been bitten and he is able to capture the snake he does so by pressing a stick upon it just behind the head and then binding the snake to the stick at that point. With the snake thus held he returns to the camp.

There the snake is left until it is seen to pass all the blood it has extracted from the person bitten. When this occurs the person begins to recover, and soon all ill effects have passed away. The snake is now released not killed. If it were killed the person would undoubtedly die also.

755 For the poisonous stab of a catfish, stingray or other fish a live 752 *borok* (wood cockroach) is taken, held between the finger and thumb, and its inside is squeezed out over the wound. Another form of 278 treatment is to apply the leaves of the *rorgor*, a long trailing plant which grows in the beach sand. These leaves are heated on the coals and pressed upon the wound. For the bite of a *butungor* (scorpion), the creature itself is killed and rubbed on the bitten part.

755 Amusing in its childishness is the method of treating pustular 752 sores, boils, or swollen glands. A piece of charcoal is wrapped in a

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thin sheet of paper-bark and placed on the sore. This is then bitten either by the man himself or by a companion. The sore, hearing the crunching of the charcoal, learns that some one is fighting it, and so takes its departure.

Bleeding is resorted to in cases of severe headache, and less frequently for backache. For the former a deep cut is made above the brow, usually by a single blow with an iron or flint spear-head. Another method is to take a splinter of glass or flint, and with a flick of the wrist to make a cut in the inner corner of the eye. Still another is to take a piece of *baku*, a trailing cane, split it and shape it to a sharp point. This piece of cane is then thrust up one of the nostrils, and is kept there with the finger plugging the nostril until a throbbing sensation begins. It is then quickly withdrawn, and is followed by profuse bleeding.

For wounds such as those inflicted by iron- or stone-headed spears the male flower stalk of the *woragar* (cicad) is used. This is split open and the soft centre obtained, which is cut into small pieces placed in a *dʒakaruŋ*, paper-bark basket, mixed with urine, warmed by dropping a hot stone into it, and then applied to the wound.

The treatment of a man who has been so wounded that his intestines protrude is a crude and gruesome business. A man so wounded sits on the ground while a companion withdraws as much of his viscera as possible and lays it out on the sand beside him. The injured man then takes a deep drink of water, and all present watch to see if any of it escapes from the parts visible. If no leakage is observed it is presumed that the man has suffered no internal injury, and his organs are washed and replaced. Certain plants are then obtained which may be used either singly or in conjunction. These are *dirrbuk*, a small carrrot-like root, and *lauwarr*, a kind of grass. These are pounded between stones and then inserted through the wound into the abdominal cavity in order to keep the organs in position. If neither of these plants are to be obtained, almost any substance may be used.

The external wound is then painted with white clay and a dressing made of *warrkarr*, the bulb of a large lily, is applied, after which the man is bound round with strips of paper-bark. Nothing

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752 278 is done to remove the substances inserted into the man's body, and my informants are quite positive that he carries the grass, *etc.*, about inside him until his dying day.

752 When a man is speared with a barbed wooden spear great difficulty is often experienced in extracting it, particularly if the wound be near some vital organ of the body. If speared in one of the limbs the spear is usually pushed right through and withdrawn at the side opposite to the entry. In the case of a body wound this cannot be done, so the spear is cut off close to the body and a dressing [278] of *dʒalkor*, tree orchid, is applied, after which the man is bound with paper-bark. This dressing is said to penetrate along the spear-head and loosen it. When, however, I asked how long it would be before the spear could be withdrawn the reply was *Bamantha. Narnak barrpamiri.* (A long time. When the flesh becomes putrid.) It would therefore appear that the " medicine " does not help matters very much.

752 278 Burning owing to the habit of sleeping in close proximity to fires is of very frequent occurrence, and is treated in the following way. If the skin be not destroyed an orchid stem is crushed between the teeth until it is soft and glutinous, and then dabbed on the affected part. If the skin be badly broken the burn is painted with *miku*, red ochre.

757 279 A variety of preparations are used for ulcers, yaws and similar diseases. One is to cut open the stem of a *gunga*, pandanus palm, and obtain the pithy centre, which is pounded up, mixed with urine, and applied hot. Another is to get the gum of the *warndua*, blood-wood eucalypt, dissolve it in water and paint on every couple of days. Yet another is to scrape off the under bark of the *barnggor*, black mangrove. This also is mixed with water and painted on the affected parts. For applying these preparations a small green stick is taken and the end crushed between the teeth until it forms a rough sort of brush.

757 An interesting method is followed in the treatment of the raised sores which often accompany yaws and which appear most frequently on the palms of the hands or the soles of the feet. A person suffering from such a sore goes out on a reef or sand-bank when the tide is low and finds a *yanungani*, sea anemone, which is lying open. He

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then quickly presses the affected part into the open centre of the creature, whose tentacles immediately contract and cause a certain amount of suction. The member is held there for a considerable time, and when withdrawn the raised exterior is said to have been removed and clean bleeding flesh, which will soon heal over, exposed. Another form of treatment for such sores which is used more particularly by tribes further inland is to prepare in the following manner some dogs' excreta. This substance is wrapped in a piece of paper-bark and rolled and kneaded until it is soft. Small pieces of bone or other foreign substances which have passed through the animal are then extracted, and the excreta placed and bound upon the affected part.

For influenza, fevers, and general aches and pains the following are the more generally used preparations.

(*a*) *Kauulurr*, a coarse kind of grass. This is pounded between stones and mixed with water. It is used both as a liniment and taken internally.

(*b*) *Balparayan*, a fairly large tree with light-coloured leaves and fruit like a small green apricot. The soft outer bark of this tree is scraped off and the gum which exudes is mixed with water and rubbed on.

The two above are sometimes used in conjunction as an embrocation, but the *balparayan* is not taken internally.

(*c*) *Kuninyi*, a shrub with large dark-green foliage. The leaves are treated as in the cases above, and are used as a liniment. The small cone-like fruit is taken green, crushed, and eaten as medicine. The ripe fruit is eaten as food.

(*d*) *Muttirr*, a small tree with very rough light-coloured leaves. These leaves are prepared in the usual way, and the preparation rubbed on the affected parts.

(*e*) *Karaika*, stringy-bark tree. The young shoots of this tree are crushed and steeped in water, which is then drunk. This is regarded as a very effective remedy for coughs.

(*f*) *Baku*, a trailing cane. This is prepared in the same way, and is used as a liniment and also taken internally.

One method of curing a cough is to eject some *gal*, sputum, into a small shell, close the shell with a leaf or piece of paper-bark and

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757 place it in the fire. It is said that within a few days at most of doing this the cough will disappear.
278 The ever-present *kal-kal*, green ant, is employed as an emetic. These insects are crushed between the palms of the hands, mixed with water, and swallowed. It is said that violent vomiting is thereby produced.

For diarrhœa a small brown fungus which grows on the bark of certain trees and which is called *buloŋun* is taken roasted on the coals then scraped into water, which is drunk cold. The young shoots of a tree called *narini*, chewed and eaten, are also said to give relief from this complaint.

Such are some of the remedies and modes of treatment employed 757 by these aborigines in endeavouring to overcome their various complaints, injuries, and diseases. In the preparation and adminis- [887] tration of the various remedies it is the old women who are chiefly engaged. The *marrngit*, magician, deals only with those cases [756] where the patient's condition is believed to be directly due to the operation of evil magic.

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